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THE MIDDLETON BOWL

Frontispiece.

"She was quite certain that she recognized that short scarlet skirt."

The Middleton Bowl

BY

ELLEN DOUGLAS DELAND

With Illustrations by
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THE MIDDLETON BOWL

The Middleton Bowl

CHAPTER I

A TOMBOY

"IT is shocking—positively shocking!"

The five Misses Middleton crowded about the window, if ladies so punctilious, so precise, so ceremonious as were the five Misses Middleton could be said to crowd.

"See her now, running as fast as any one of those boys," said Miss Middleton the eldest.

"And without her hat!" said Miss Joanna, settling her spectacles.

"And her hair streaming!" added

Miss Dorcas, as she clutched her knitting-needles.

"And—and—I hardly like to say it, but, my dear sisters, do you notice how she—well, how she thrusts out her feet?" murmured Miss Melissa, with a look of embarrassment.

"But how happy she looks!" said Miss Thomasine, though in so low a voice that it almost seemed as if she must be hoping that her sisters would not hear her. But they did, and immediately they turned upon her in a body.

"Thomasine, I am astonished! In the first place, you cannot possibly tell whether she looks happy or not, and in the second place—" But no one ever heard what came in the second place, for Miss Middleton's sentence was broken short by an exclamation of added horror from her four sisters.

"Oh, she has fallen down!"

A profound silence while they all looked.

"There, she is up again! Oh, my dear sisters, she is going to start again! What shall we do with her, and why did this come upon us?"

The four elder Misses Middleton sank again into their chairs. Miss Thomasine remained at the window until the subject of their remarks had disappeared among the trees at the farther end of the lawn. Then she too resumed her seat.

"Something must be done," said Miss Joanna, for at least the eleventh time that morning.

The five Misses Middleton lived in Alden, in a large old-fashioned house on the outskirts of the town. Here their grandfather had bought an extensive tract of land and had built a stately mansion in the days when rooms were made of spacious breadth and depth and ceilings were lofty. The town at that time was busy and bustling enough. A large number of the inhabitants were seafaring men, and not only commanded their ships, but owned them too, and foreign vessels touching at the port brought much stir of life and commerce, now long since passed away.

Old Captain Middleton sailed many a voyage in his own good ships, and brought home not only plenty of money, but treasures from China, Japan, and even from India. Among other things there was a quaintly shaped yellow porcelain bowl decorated with odd Oriental colors, which was made in China. It was not large, but its texture and workmanship were exquisite, and it was said that there was no other like it in America. In fact, there was but one other in the world, and that was in the possession of a rich mandarin of Peking. This bowl had been presented by old Captain Middleton to his daughter-in-law upon his son's marriage, and it now belonged to their five daughters. It was always to remain in the family, and it was known as the Middleton bowl.

Times had changed in Alden, as the saying is, and it was no longer a commercial town, but a sleepy, slow-going place as far as business was concerned. Its present inhabitants, however, most of whose ancestors had lived there for generations, endeavored to keep up the modern life and thought. There were reading-clubs and intellectual societies of all sorts for the serious-minded, and balls, assemblies, and teas for the more frivolous, but the five Misses Middleton were beyond it all. Behind the massive stone walls which surrounded their grandfather's acres, now their own, they lived in seclusion, as remote from outside life and outside ideas as though they dwelt in some lonely castle in an enchanted wood.

To be sure, they had frequent callers, for they were greatly respected by their fellow townspeople, and these calls were returned after the proper interval of time had elapsed.

On such occasions the old barouche drawn by the stout bays and driven by old John, the coachman, was ordered, and three of the ladies went forth in state and in their best camel's-hair shawls. Miss Thomasine was always the third, for she, being the youngest, did not object to driving with her back to the horses. They followed now precisely the same rules of life which they had followed forty years ago, and change of any kind was displeasing to them.

Into this quiet household of five maiden ladies was suddenly precipitated a twelve-year-old niece. Their only brother, Theodore by name, who was very much younger than themselves, had early in life left the quiet old home in Alden and gone to one of the large cities, where he married and became a prosperous business man. Circumstances now obliged him to go to South America for six or eight months, and rather than subject their only daughter, Theodora, to the dangers of the climate, Mr. and Mrs. Middleton had asked her aunts to take charge of her until their return.

The five aunts were somewhat aghast

at this proposition. Since Miss Thomasine had given up her dolls and packed them tenderly away in the attic many, many years ago, childhood was unknown to them, for Theodora's home was far away, and she had never visited them before.

However, it was a girl—a boy would have been absolutely impossible—and next to Theodore she was their nearest of kin. And Mrs. Middleton herself had suggested a means of relief should her daughter prove to be too much care for them.

"If you grow tired of her, or if she gives you any trouble, send her to boarding-school. She will be happy at Miss Ford's, where I went, and I have made every arrangement for her to go if she should be too much for you. But I am sure no one could grow tired of my Teddy!''

At first all went well. The aunts felt so sorry for poor little Theodora when she was left for the first time in her life without her parents that they vied with one another in their efforts to make her happy. Miss Thomasine unpacked her dolls and carried them carefully downstairs, smelling strongly of camphor, and seeming to blink their round, unseeing black eyes in the unaccustomed glare of day.

But Theodora only looked at them with a languid curiosity, spoke of their being so ''funny and old-fashioned,'' and then sneezed from the fumes of the camphor, and turned away.

Miss Joanna unlocked the corner cupboard and brought out her own china tea-set, unplayed with now these fifty years. But Theodora almost laughed at the clumsy shape of the sugar-bowl, and then accidentally broke it, upon which Miss Joanna locked them all up again with an air which showed that Theodora had handled them for the last time.

Miss Melissa then produced some books, which her niece seized upon with avidity. But she soon declared that she did not care for that kind of story (they were some of Miss Edgeworth's tales); that Rosamond was a perfect goose to think the purple vase was worth having. She, Theodora, would have known better the moment she saw it. She would have discovered at once that it was filled with a purple powder, and was really nothing but plain glass.

Had not her aunts any boys' stories? She liked them best. Upon which the five Misses Middleton looked at one another, and mentally held up their hands in horror and dismay. And soon, all too soon, was it discovered that the only things which really made Theodora happy were boys and boys' games and boys' books.

Miss Middleton herself, in the solemn conclave which took place upon the morning when this story opens, was courageous enough to put the matter into words.

"I verily believe," said she, "that our niece Theodora is what is called a—a tomboy!"

"Sister!" cried they all, while four pairs of hands were uplifted and then dropped into four silk laps; and Miss Middleton, having made this statement, looked distinctly relieved.

"And the worst of it," said Miss Joanna, "is that I strongly suspect we have brought it upon ourselves. In order to save ourselves the trouble of providing entertainment for Theodora, we actually suggested—one of us did—that she should be allowed to play with the Hoyt children.''

Here she glanced severely at her sister Dorcas. Miss Dorcas made no reply, but she looked guilty, and dropped a stitch in her knitting.

''Dorcas forgot that they were all boys, I have no doubt,'' said Miss Thomasine, in her gentle voice. ''We knew Ellen Hoyt when she was young, Joanna, you remember. As gentle a girl as ever lived.''

''Yes,'' replied Miss Dorcas, her courage returning when she found that she had a champion. ''It was natural that we should suppose her children should be quiet and gentle too. I am sure I never dreamed that they were all boys.''

''It has been most disastrous,'' continued Miss Joanna.

''But there is one resource left,'' suggested Miss Melissa. ''You know, sisters, what Theodore's wife said—she spoke of it herself—I am sure we should never have thought of it.''

Miss Melissa had a vague, hurried manner which never failed to irritate her sister Joanna, who was brisk, and in other conditions of life would have been businesslike.

''If you mean the boarding-school plan, Melissa,'' she said, ''why do you not say so in plain words? For my part, I think it would be the best place for the child.''

''Not if we can help it,'' pleaded Miss Thomasine. ''She is our niece, you know, and I do not like the idea of closing our doors against her.''

''Thomasine, you are so extreme in your language,'' said Miss Middleton. ''I am sure no one dreams of closing our doors against Theodora; but if we cannot control her, I quite agree with Joanna that it would be the best place for her.''

It was just at this point in the conversation that a startling clamor was heard from down-stairs. The ladies were sitting in the ''spare chamber'' on the second floor, as they were apt to do of a morning. The noise drew nearer. It was unmistakably a cry of mingled wrath and pain, and it was accompanied by the sound of hurrying feet. Children's shoes were scuffling up the old oak staircase. It sounded as if at least a dozen pairs of feet were hurrying toward the five Misses Middleton.

The door opened with a burst, and into the room came Theodora. Blood was streaming from her nose, tears from her eyes, and in her arms she carried—was it? could it be? The five Misses Middleton looked, and looked again. Their niece was bringing into their presence a dead kitten! She was accompanied by two of her friends, the Hoyt boys, but they, dismayed by the sight of a circle of five ladies, retreated into the hall, and peered through the crack of the half-open door. Still another was at the foot of the stairs, not daring to come up higher.

"Theodora, what is it?" cried Miss Middleton, while Miss Melissa shuddered and felt for her smelling-salts. She was afraid of cats, even of dead ones.

"It 's a dear little kitten, Aunt Adaline, and it is dead. It will never breathe again. Oh, that horrible boy, that Andy Morse! I wish I had killed him dead! But I gave him a black eye, I know I did."

"A black eye! Theodora, I insist upon knowing the cause of this uproar. And the blood! Have you been hurt?"

"Let me wash it away from your face," said Miss Thomasine; "but first, if it 's possible, Theodora, I think you had better get rid of that—that cat."

"Poor little kitten! we are going to have a nice funeral to make up to it for all its sufferings. And I am not really much hurt, Aunt Tom. It 's a nose-bleed, so it looks as if I were. The boy punched me right in the nose. But I kicked and scratched him well, I can tell you."

The five aunts rose to their feet as one woman. They looked at Theodora, and then they looked at one another. Finally they all sat down again.

"Give that animal to those boys in the hall to take away, and then give an account of yourself," commanded Miss Middleton.

Theodora hesitated for a moment, and then she retired to the hall, where she held a whispered conference with her waiting friends.

"As nice a box as you can find," were her last words, "and loads of flowers. Dig it pretty deep. I 'll be there as soon as I can."

Again there was the sound of clattering shoes upon the stairs, and Theodora returned to her aunts. A maid was sent for, and the marks of her recent conflict were washed away, to which proceedings she submitted quietly, and then in a clean white apron she came back once more. She closed the door into the hall at her aunts' request, and opened the conversation at once.

"I 'll tell you how it was," she said. "You see, I was playing 'I spy' with the Hoyts, having the best time you ever heard of; and do you know, I can run as fast as Arthur and Clem, and almost as fast as Ray! We were playing the kind of 'I spy' where you have to hide, and then run in to goal when It is not looking. Did you ever play that way, Aunt Tom?"

"No," murmured Miss Thomasine.

"Do not stop for such questions," said Miss Middleton; "and do not address your aunt so disrespectfully."

"Why, I did n't mean to be disrespectful, Aunt Adaline. I call her that because I love her, and I asked her last night, when she came to kiss me good-night, if I might call her 'Aunt Tom,' and if she would please call me 'Teddy' instead of hateful long Theodora, and she said I might, and she would. Of course I should n't dream of calling you 'Aunt Ad,' or Aunt Joanna 'Aunt Jo,' but Aunt Tom is different. She seems younger, and as if she might be sort of jolly if you would only let her, so that is the reason I asked her if she ever played that kind of 'I spy.' Of course I don't suppose the rest of you ever played 'I spy' at all."

And she looked about upon the group with some scorn. Teddy spoke very rapidly, so this speech did not consume much time.

"No, we never did," replied Miss Middleton, "and now we should be glad to hear the remainder of your story."

"Oh yes, I 'm going to tell you. I got away from the others somehow, and I thought I 'd reach goal by a shorter way if I climbed the stone wall and went by the road a little way."

"Theodora!"

"What, Aunt Joanna?"

"Surely you did not climb the stone wall?"

"Why, yes; it is as easy as anything! I 'm sure you could yourself, Aunt Joanna, just in that place. You put your foot right on a stone that juts out, and if I were there to give you a boost, you would go over as easy as anything."

"Oh, my dear niece!" cried Miss Melissa; "I do hope, I really do hope that your aunt Joanna—She could not I am sure—"

"Melissa," exclaimed her sister, "if you think over the matter for a moment you will realize that no power on earth could tempt me to climb the stone wall."

"I hoped not, but—"

Awed by a wrathful glance from behind Miss Joanna's spectacles, Miss Melissa subsided, and again sniffed her salts.

"Again I must ask you to continue," said Miss Middleton to her niece. "I suppose you fell, which caused your nose to bleed?"

"No I did n't. I did n't fall at all. But who do you suppose I found in the road? That horrible Andy Morse! You know he is a great big fellow—bigger than Ray Hoyt. You 've seen him about, probably. And he was throwing stones at that poor dear kitten." Theodora's eyes grew big, and her words came more slowly now, and with great emphasis. ‘‘He had it tied to a stump, and he was throwing stones at it, and the last one, just as I came up, killed the kitten.’’ She paused and looked about for sympathy. ‘‘I suppose you all feel just as I did,’’ she said, presently. ‘‘As if your throats were all choked up, and you could n’t speak, and your hearts were going to fly right out of your bodies, and your heads were going to burst. That is the way I felt, and I am sure you would have done just as I did. I walked right up to that boy, and before he even knew I was there, I kicked him and scratched him, and banged my fist right in his eye. ‘There, Andy Morse,’ I said, ‘that’s what you get for stoning a kitten! How do you like that?’ And he banged back, and that ’s what made my nose bleed. Then he ran off as hard as he could. Great coward!'' she added contemptuously. ''Think of stoning a kitten and being driven off by a girl! If there were not a commandment about killing people, I should really be almost sorry I had n't killed him. Why is n't it just as wicked to kill a cat as to kill a bad boy, Aunt Adaline?''

''I—I really cannot answer such a question, Theodora. You do not realize what you are saying, I am sure. But you have done very wrong. I scarcely know how to express my feelings at such conduct. I beg you will not do so again. It was most unladylike, to say the least.''

''But he was hurting that poor kitten, Aunt Adaline! How could I help it? Don't you think I did right, Aunt Tom?'' she asked, turning in despair to her favorite aunt.

Miss Thomasine hesitated beneath the

glare of eight sisterly eyes while they awaited her reply. Theodora hoped for support, but she was disappointed.

"No, Teddy, I do not think you did right," said her aunt. "The boy was very cruel, I admit, and I do not wonder at your indignation; but it was not for you to inflict pain upon a fellow-creature. I think you were as cruel to the boy as he was to the cat. Besides, it was not the proper thing for a lady to do. Would your mother do such a thing?"

Theodora was silent for a moment. "I don't suppose she would," she said, presently; "and perhaps I ought not to have attacked Andy Morse the way I did. I am not sorry yet about it, though, but perhaps I will be by to-night. I will tell you if I am. And now may I go? They are waiting for me to have the funeral.''

''My dear Theodora, what do you mean?'' exclaimed Miss Middleton.

''Why, you know what a funeral is, Aunt Adaline, don't you? We are going to give the kitten a pleasant funeral to make up for its sad death.''

''Do you think they ought?'' asked Miss Middleton, looking helplessly about upon her companions.

''It sounds very shocking, and I for one do not approve,'' said Miss Joanna, with her customary decision.

''I do not like the idea,'' murmured Miss Dorcas.

''It seems—really, it seems—as if something ought to be done—to correct. But I do not know—'' faltered Miss Melissa.

''Suppose I go with her to the place

and see what they intend to do,'' suggested Miss Thomasine.

''Do, sister!'' said Miss Middleton. ''It will ease my mind greatly if you will.''

So Miss Thomasine went to her room, and with much deliberation dressed herself for a walk in the garden with her niece. She put on her head a large sun-hat drawn down on both sides with a broad white ribbon. This ribbon she crossed beneath her chin and tied on top of the hat, which was unadorned with other trimming. She placed upon her shoulders a black silk mantilla, and drew on her brown thread gloves, the fingers of which were very long and remained empty at the tips. Then she took her sunshade and descended the stairs, calling to her niece as she went.

The door of the great drawing-room

was slowly opened, and Theodora came out. Her face was much flushed, and she held one hand concealed beneath her apron. Together they walked out the side door and down the gravelled path to the garden.

They had scarcely left the house before Miss Joanna went down to the parlor to attend to her task of dusting the foreign treasures. This was not intrusted to the house-maids, for the five sisters did it each in turn. In a few moments she returned to the spare chamber and carefully closed the door behind her.

"Sisters," she exclaimed, "look at this!"

She held up for their inspection a small piece of yellow Chinese porcelain.

"This," said she, "is all that is left of the Middleton bowl."

CHAPTER II

A CRUEL BLOW

WHILE Miss Joanna Middleton was imparting the news of her startling discovery to her sisters in the house, Teddy and her aunt Thomasine were walking as swiftly as possible toward the lower end of the garden. Theodora's face betrayed that she was greatly excited, and she held her aunt's hand tightly, and almost dragged her along in her haste to get there.

"My dear Teddy," said Miss Thomasine at length, while she fairly gasped for breath, "I am not accustomed to walking so fast. I—I really must stop for a moment."

"Oh, do excuse me, Aunt Tom! I never thought. You see, I am so used to running."

They stopped, and stood facing each other for a moment. "What have you under your apron?" asked Miss Thomasine.

Theodora's face grew redder still, and she cast down her eyes. This was unusual, for the child had a frank, fearless habit of fixing her brown eyes upon those of the person to whom she was speaking, which was very winning. Her face had a way of showing every emotion which she might be feeling, and her aunt saw at once that something was the matter.

"Are you so troubled about the kitten, Teddy, my dear?" asked Miss Thomasine. "Do you begin to feel sorry that you fought the boy?"

"I 'm not a bit sorry, Aunt Tom.

I 'm glad, glad, glad! But you need n't look so disappointed; the sorry feeling may come later. It usually does after I 've been naughty, but sometimes not for a good while. For instance, when I 've been naughty in the morning I very often don't begin to feel sorry till toward sunset. I suppose I begin to think then of that verse in the Bible about not letting the sun go down on your wrath. So perhaps late in the afternoon I may begin to feel a little bit sorry about Andy Morse, though I don't know. But are you rested yet, Aunt Tom? I do want to get to the funeral, but not unless you are quite ready,'' she added, politely.

''Suppose you take my other hand,'' said Miss Thomasine, ''and I will hold my sunshade in this one.''

For some reason this arrangement did not appear to please Theodora. However, she put both of her hands under her apron, and after a curious sound of the clatter of china, she produced her right hand and gave it to her aunt.

"What have you there, Teddy, my dear? What are you hiding under your apron?" asked the gentle little lady.

"Oh, nothing much, Aunt Tom. At least—that is—yes, there is something, but—well—I would rather not tell you what it is, if you don't mind."

Soon they turned a corner, and reached the spot where the six Hoyt boys were awaiting them.

"We thought you were never coming, Ted! What kept you so long?" shouted Paul, who was the eldest, and therefore master of ceremonies. Catching sight of Miss Thomasine, he stopped abruptly. "Are n't you going to have a funeral?"

he asked. "We 've got everything ready."

"Oh, yes, we 're going to have it," responded she; "Aunt Tom came with me to see how we do it. I 'm sorry to have kept you waiting, but I really could not get here before; and now I must speak to Arthur a minute. You other boys just entertain Aunt Tom, please. She would like to rest. What a lovely grave, and what sweet flowers! Arthur, come here a minute."

They walked a short distance away, and then disappeared behind some currant-bushes. The other boys appeared to be unequal to the task of entertaining Miss Thomasine, so a profound silence reigned, making plainly audible the murmur of Theodora's voice.

"Hurry up there," said Paul impatiently. "If you want me to help with this funeral you must come quick. What are you talking about, anyway?''

''Never mind,'' replied Teddy, running into sight, followed by Arthur. ''It 's a secret, and you must n't ask.''

Her aunt noticed that both hands were now visible, and that she carried nothing in them; but Miss Thomasine soon forgot that she had felt any curiosity in the matter, and turned her attention to the proceedings of these very remarkable children. She also forgot that she had been deputed by her sisters to stop these proceedings, and became wholly and at once an interested spectator.

''We will start from here and walk once around the garden,'' said Teddy, ''and we will make quite a long procession, for there are so many of us. I wish we had some music. We might pretend that the poor dear kitten was a soldier.''

"So we will," cried Clement. "I 'll get my drum quicker than a wink."

Before he had finished speaking he was over the garden wall.

"And get my trumpet," shouted Raymond.

Presently Clem returned, and all was now ready. Upon the boys' express wagon reposed a pasteboard box, in which had been placed the kitten, more honored in its death than in its short, unhappy life. Yellow daisies, asters, and goldenrod were heaped upon the cart in magnificent profusion, but the handle was draped in black.

Arthur and Walter acted as horses, and subdued their natural speed to a funereal gait; Clem and Raymond marched before, one beating his drum with measured rat-tat-tat, the other blowing long and melancholy wails upon his Fourth-of-July horn. On either side the cart walked Paul and Charlie, while close behind came Theodora and her aunt Thomasine.

"You will make a perfect chief mourner," whispered Teddy, "for your hat is so black and so is your cape. I shall hold my handkerchief to my eyes, so."

"But, my dear," expostulated Miss Thomasine, "I really cannot. I do not approve. Remember, it is only a kitten."

"Yes, yes, I do remember. That poor dead kitten! Please come, Aunt Tom! Don't spoil it all, and try to look as sad as you can!"

And before Miss Thomasine really knew it, the procession had begun to move and she was in it. Around the garden they walked, and finally returned to their starting-place, where the grave had been already dug. Paul and Charlie attended to this part of the ceremonies, the musicians blew and beat a parting salute upon their instruments, Theodora mopped her dry eyes, and the horses, when all was over, relieved their feelings by running away.

"Was n't it fun?" exclaimed Teddy. "I never did like anybody so much as you boys, and you do a funeral beautifully. Do you really have to go back now, Aunt Tom? I wish you could stay here and play with us. Charlie is going to let me try his bicycle, and I 'd like you to see me."

"Oh, my dear child," cried Miss Thomasine. "It will never do in the world. You must not—indeed you must not! If you knew the feeling that your aunts and I have about bicycles."

"But they are not dangerous, Aunt Tom. Indeed, lots of people ride them."

"It is not the danger so much as the— Well, my dear, you must never do it without asking your other aunts. A lady on a bicycle!"

"But I 'm not a lady; I 'm only a child. Besides, lots of ladies ride them. I 've seen them in Alden over and over again."

"It does not seem to me as if they can be real ladies. But come into the house and ask your aunt Adaline. I cannot take any more responsibility. I feel uncomfortable now about that funeral. I do not know what your other aunts will say."

"Oh dear!" grumbled Theodora; "it is such a bother to have to ask so many people what I can do. If it were just you, Aunt Tom, I should n't mind, but five are such a lot, and you all think everything is so dreadful. I am sure mamma would let me ride a wheel." Her aunt made no reply, and they walked toward the house. "There, I suppose I ought not to have said that," added Teddy, penitently, after a moment's pause. "It was disrespectful, I suppose. But oh, Aunt Tom, if you only won't all say I can't ride a wheel, it is all I ask!"

They found the door standing open, and from the sound of voices it was evident that some one was in the parlor, and immediately the parlor door was opened a crack, and at it appeared Miss Melissa, beckoning mysteriously to her sister.

"Come!" she whispered. "Thomasine, the—My dear sister be prepared! A cruel blow!"

"What do you mean, Melissa?" cried

Miss Thomasine, her nerves quite unstrung by the performance in which she had so recently taken part, and also by her late altercation, if so it could be called, with her niece.

"Come!" repeated Miss Melissa, and her sister went into the drawing-room, almost expecting to find that there had been a death in the family.

Theodora ran up-stairs. "They have found it out! They have found it out!" she thought, and flying to her room she closed and bolted the door. Ten minutes later her name was called from without.

"Miss Theodora, are you there?" It was Mary Ann, one of the maids. Teddy did not speak nor move.

"Miss Theodora," said Mary Ann again, tapping at the door and rattling the handle as she spoke. "I think, miss, you had better let me in. Your aunts want to speak to you."

Slowly Teddy rose from the bed, where she had flung herself, and reluctantly opened the door. Her dark hair, which was cut short across her forehead and hung in a wavy mass behind, looked sadly dishevelled, and her face showed unmistakably that she had been crying. "What do they want me for?" she asked.

"A terrible thing has happened, miss," replied Mary Ann, in an awed whisper; "the Middleton bowl is broke—the Middleton bowl as was worth hundreds of dollars, I 've heard tell, that folks has been comin' from all over the country to see ever since I 've lived here, and that 's goin' on fifteen years."

"But why do they want me?" asked Theodora, showing no surprise when told of the calamity, as Mary Ann noted.

"Because, miss, somebody has broke it, and as it ain't one of the ladies themselves, it must have been either you or some of the help. So, miss, if 't was you and you don't tell it, some of us has got to suffer."

"Mary Ann," said Teddy, stopping short at the stairs, "must I really go down? Can't I run away? Won't you help me to run away, Mary Ann? I 'll give you something nice if you will."

"La, miss, don't talk and look so wild! You just tell 'em you did it quite accidental, and they 'll forgive you. The Miss Middletons is real ladies, and they won't scold, but they 'll take it awful hard if you try to deceive 'em. Just tell 'em you did it."

"I can't possibly do that. Oh, Mary Ann, I wish I were in South America with my father and mother!"

She had reached the parlor door by this time, and there she paused. Presently, summoning all her courage, she pushed it open and entered.

"Poor little miss!" said Mary Ann to herself. "Of course she did it, and I 'm real sorry for her."

And then she went off to the kitchen to tell the other frightened servants that there was no doubt as to who was guilty.

The parlor was a very large room, and Venetian blinds at the seven long windows shut out the light of day as much as possible. Two of them, at one end of the room, had been drawn up this morning, however. As has been said, the parlor was furnished in old-fashioned mahogany. There were eight-legged tables, quaintly shaped shelves and cabinets, Chippendale chairs, and even an ancient piano, made in the style of eighty years ago.

The Misses Middleton were modern in one respect only; their drawing-room was filled with bric-a-brac. There were lacquered-ware tea-poys from Japan, and quaint idols from India, while rare old bits of china filled every available space. Near one of the windows stood a Chinese table. It was curiously carved, and the top was inlaid with bits of wood and ivory in the shapes of mysterious Chinese symbols, and upon this table had always rested, in honor and apparent security, the famous Middleton bowl.

The walls were lined with fine old paintings, and portraits from the hands of Sully, Stuart, and even of Sir Joshua Reynolds and Gainsborough, looked down upon the five descendants of the ancient race of Middleton this September morning when they sat, drawn up in battle array, to receive their niece.

Slowly she walked into the room, and with downcast eyes and burning face she stood before her aunts. They were seated in a semicircle, their backs turned toward the windows, where the shades had been raised; therefore the light streamed full in the face of Theodora.

"What have you to say for yourself, Theodora?" asked Miss Middleton, in an impressive voice.

There was no reply. Miss Thomasine looked unhappy, and covered her face with her handkerchief, and Miss Melissa again made use of her salts. Miss Dorcas began to knit nervously, but Miss Joanna stared straight at Theodora through her gold-rimmed spectacles.

"Have you nothing to say, Theodora?" asked Miss Middleton, after a pause.

"No, Aunt Adaline."

"You have not told her why she has been called, sister!" exclaimed Miss Thomasine. "Perhaps she knows nothing about it."

"Is that probable after what you told us?" asked Miss Middleton, austerely. "However, I will humor you. Theodora, you have seen the Middleton bowl?"

Involuntarily Teddy's eyes turned toward the now empty Chinese table, and then were dropped again.

"Yes, it stood there," continued Miss Middleton, "and at ten o'clock this morning it was still there, for I saw it myself. At a quarter past eleven, when your aunt Joanna came down to dust the parlor, the Middleton bowl was gone! Not a trace of it left but this small piece of china to show that it had been there."

Theodora glanced up again, and saw a triangular bit of china, an inch or two long, which her aunt held in her hand and then laid upon the table.

"You know the value of that bowl. You have been told that your great-grandfather brought it home, and that there is said to be but one like it in the world. Now that other is the only one. The Middleton bowl is no more."

She paused, and her sisters, more than one of them, sobbed audibly. Miss Middleton, Miss Joanna, and Theodora herself alone were dry-eyed.

"Have you anything to say for yourself?" asked Miss Middleton, for the third time.

And again Theodora replied, "No, Aunt Adaline."

Miss Middleton's foot moved impatiently. "You must say something, Theodora. In plain words, did you break the bowl?" There was no answer. "Very well. You would have saved yourself in our esteem if you had confessed at once that you broke it, and that it was an accident, as I suppose it was. We should have forgiven you, great as the loss is. Now you are attempting to hide it. I am only thankful that you are not actually denying the fact, but I suppose you realize that it would be useless. The evidence is too strong against you."

"What do you mean, Aunt Adaline?"

"Your aunt Thomasine will explain."

"Oh, sister!" murmured Miss Thomasine. "I almost wish I had not told you; but you took me so by surprise that the words came right out before I knew it. Poor little Teddy! I am sure she did not mean to break it."

"I beg you will not call her by that ridiculous boy's name, Thomasine!" interrupted Miss Joanna. "And you are doing your best to encourage her to keep silence. I think you and sister Adaline are entirely too lenient. If I had my way, I should soon force her to confess."

Teddy, who had almost cried while her aunt Thomasine was speaking, now raised her head and gazed defiantly at Miss Joanna. "I did not break the bowl," she said, in a loud, clear voice.

"Oh, Theodora!" exclaimed the five aunts, in a chorus of dismay.

"I did not break the bowl," she repeated.

"But, my dear, the pieces which you carried under your apron to the garden?" murmured Miss Thomasine, greatly aghast at the turn which affairs were taking.

"How do you know I did?" asked Theodora, her face, which had become pale, again growing red.

"I—I thought I heard them clatter, but I may have been mistaken."

"The only thing to do," said Miss Joanna, "is to go to the garden ourselves, and find what is left of the bowl. You said, Thomasine, that she appeared to have placed the pieces among the currant-bushes. Then we shall discover whether or not you were mistaken. You are painfully weak and indefinite, and I am glad that I, for one, always know what I am talking about. Do you not agree with me, Adaline, that it would be well for us to go?"

Miss Middleton acquiesced, and the five sisters made themselves ready for their walk. They were arrayed in garden hats and black silk mantillas, and each one carried a sunshade. Even in the midst of her misery Theodora wondered at their dressing so exactly alike, and why they all wore gloves that were too large for them.

Slowly they walked, two by two, along the path which led to the garden, the maids watching them from the kitchen windows, and John, the hired man, pausing in his work among the sweet-pease to stare after them in astonishment. He also had heard of the calamity which had befallen the household, but he did not know the connection between that and the foot of the garden, and he never before had seen his mistresses walk there at high noon (as it was according to the old dial), though he had lived with them and hoed their potatoes for twenty years.

Two by two they went, Theodora and

her aunt Thomasine in front, the other aunts behind, down the very path over which had passed that delightful funeral procession so short a time before.

"I wish I were that kitten!" thought Teddy, miserably. "I would rather be stoned than this! I suppose there is no way out of it. I 've got to show them where I hid the pieces. If I only had n't left that little bit which I never saw at all, they would have thought the bowl was stolen. They never would have dreamed of my breaking it. How foolish I was!"

One of the Hoyt boys, looking over the wall, saw the approach of the Middleton ladies, and summoning all his brothers who were available, they leaned upon the wall and watched the proceedings with intense interest. Arthur alone, when he saw them coming, dropped the rake which he had been using and fled toward the barn.

"She 's only a girl, after all," he said to himself, indignantly. "She can't keep it dark. I told her they 'd never guess it if she only held her tongue, and now she has given it away!"

Then his curiosity as to what would happen next overcame his apparent desire for flight, and he returned to his brothers on the garden wall, from the top of which could be had a fine view of the Misses Middletons' currant-bushes. When he arrived at this point of vantage he found that the ladies had reached the object of their walk, and that they stood in a row upon the path.

"Now," said Joanna, with sarcasm—"now we shall see whether Thomasine was mistaken or not!"

She closed her sunshade with a vicious

"'Theodora watched her for a moment in silence."

snap, and proceeded to poke with it under the bushes. Theodora watched her for a moment in silence.

"You need n't do that, Aunt Joanna," she said; and walking a little distance, she stooped and thrust her hand into the mass of green weeds and dead leaves which had accumulated there. Almost immediately she drew forth two pieces of broken china. "Here they are," she said.

Miss Middleton took one piece and Miss Joanna the other. Without a word they turned toward home. Miss Melissa and Miss Dorcas followed, and then Miss Thomasine, holding Theodora by the hand, fell into line behind. They walked away as slowly as they had come.

CHAPTER III

STILL A MYSTERY

"WHAT did you tell them anything for? I knew you would. A girl can't keep anything dark."

"I did n't tell. They found it out themselves."

"How could they? They would never have known it was broken if you had n't told, and they would never have known about the currant-bushes."

"They found a little bit of the china that I never saw at all, and I had to tell about the currant-bushes, because Aunt Tom said that I had something under my apron, and saw us go to the currant-bushes. They asked me, and I had to answer. They think I did it. They don't believe me when I say I did n't. It is n't a bit nice not to be believed.''

''Then you did n't say anything about —about anybody else?''

''Of course not!''

Theodora and Arthur were again in the garden. It was afternoon now of the day upon which the bowl was broken, and Theodora, after spending several hours in retirement, had been allowed to come out to get the air.

After their return to the house her aunts had tried in vain to extract something from her in regard to the accident. ''I did not break the bowl,'' was all that she could be induced to say. Each aunt tried in turn to vary this reply, but with no success.

Finally, at the end of three-quarters of an hour, Miss Middleton said:

"I think, sisters, that the best plan will be to send Theodora to her own room to think over the wicked falsehood which I am afraid she is telling. You will remember that when we were young our parents were of the opinion that solitary confinement was the wisest mode of punishment."

"They occasionally used a slipper," remarked Miss Joanna.

"But I scarcely like to use a slipper with Theodore's child."

"No! no!" cried Miss Dorcas, Miss Melissa, and Miss Thomasine, with one voice.

"So, Theodora, you may go to your room," continued Miss Middleton. "I hope that when you come out you will be ready to confess."

Theodora stood for a moment looking from one to the other of the five faces.

"I shan't do any such thing," she said. "I can't confess what I did n't do. If my mother were here she would believe me. If you were to keep me shut up in the room for weeks and weeks, when I came out I should say the same thing. Please excuse me for being disrespectful, but I think, except Aunt Tom, you are very disagreeable aunts, especially Aunt Joanna. I think I would rather live with people that were no relation to me."

So saying, she walked from their presence and went to her own room, and again shut and bolted the door. At dinner-time a tray containing several slices of dry bread and a glass of water was placed outside, and Mary Ann's voice told her that her dinner was waiting. For some time Teddy refused to open, but finally her hunger overcame her pride, and she took the tray into her room, and just as she finished, Miss Thomasine came to the door and tapped gently.

"Teddy, my dear," she said, in a low voice, at the keyhole, "let me in—your aunt Tom."

And Teddy again opened the door.

"Oh, my dear, how you have been crying!" said gentle little Miss Thomasine. "I am so grieved about it all. Teddy, if you will only tell us the truth, even now, we will forgive you. Tell me quietly how it happened."

"Aunt Tom, I can't make up a story. I did n't break the bowl. Why don't you believe me? There are other people in the world besides me! Why don't you think that some one else did it? Why am I the only person that could have broken it?"

"My dear, you forget that the evidence against you is very strong. When I came down-stairs to go with you to the garden you came out of the parlor with the pieces of china in your hand, hidden under your apron. Why did you take the trouble to hide them, or to touch them at all, if you were not the one who broke the bowl?''

Theodora was silent for a few minutes. She stood gazing at her aunt, looking straight from her fearless brown eyes into Miss Thomasine's gentle blue ones.

''That is true,'' she said at last. ''It does seem queer. But, for all that, I did n't break the bowl, Aunt Tom.''

''Then can you tell me who did?''

''No, I can't tell you who did,'' she said. ''But do you believe me now, Aunt Tom?''

''Yes, my dear, I do.''

And then the little girl burst into

tears, and hid her face in her aunt's lap.

"Oh, I am so glad!" she sobbed. "It was terrible to feel that no one believed me in this whole house."

After a while Miss Thomasine returned to her sisters, and told them of her change of opinion. Needless to say, no one agreed with her, and it required some determination on her part to remain firm in her conviction. It was not as easy to believe her niece guiltless when she was confronted by four somewhat obstinate ladies, as it had been when she was looking into Theodora's fearlessly truthful eyes.

But Miss Thomasine did not falter, and she finally succeeded in obtaining her sisters' consent to the proposition that their niece should be released from solitary confinement, and allowed to go out into the fresh air.

"For she is not accustomed to it, and I am afraid it will make her ill," urged Miss Thomasine, "and then what would Theodore and sister Gertrude say?"

At hearing which the others relented.

Theodora, upon being liberated, went at once to the garden, and here she found Arthur Hoyt awaiting her. He was leaning over the wall, looking sullenly toward Teddy as she approached.

"I thought you were never coming," he said. "What made you so long?"

"I 've been shut up," returned Teddy. "They won't believe I did n't do it—except Aunt Tom. She believes me; but no one else will."

"What did you tell them?"

"That I did n't do it."

"Nothing else?"

"Of course not."

And then ensued the conversation with which this chapter opens.

Arthur Hoyt was eleven years old. He was the fifth member of this large family, Paul, Charlie, Clement, and Raymond being older than he. Paul was nearly eighteen, and it had been an act of great condescension on his part to join in the funeral festivities of the morning; but, in spite of the fact that he was to enter Harvard this fall, he secretly loved an old-fashioned romp with his four brothers, though he would not have confessed it for the world.

The boys were all lions of health and strength, with the exception of Arthur. He had always been delicate, and in consequence had been greatly indulged by his parents. His brothers were in the habit of treating him with more consideration than they showed to one another, looking upon him perhaps as they would have looked upon a sister. When Teddy came to Alden and they first made her acquaintance, they fancied that "all she would be good for," as they expressed it, would be to play quiet games with Arthur, but they soon found out their mistake.

Teddy was as much of a "jolly good fellow" as her name implied. She could run, she could row, she could play ball with the best of them, and the boys had not recovered even yet from their astonishment at this state of affairs. The Misses Middleton's niece as much of a fellow as any of them! And they accordingly received her into their midst on terms of absolute equality.

"I 'm glad you did n't say anything about any one else," said Arthur, when he had heard Teddy's assurance that she had told nothing. He looked about apprehensively, as if he feared some one might be hidden in the same currant-bushes which had sheltered the broken bowl. "I 'll do something nice for you, Teddy. Would you like to ride my wheel?"

"Arthur! Do you really mean it?"

"Of course I do," said he, magnanimously. "I 've never let you before, because I was afraid you 'd bang it over the first thing and smash it; but I guess you 'll be careful."

It was the dearest wish of Theodora's heart to learn to ride. She had intended to ask her aunts' permission that very day; in fact, she had gone back to the house with Miss Thomasine for that especial purpose; and then had come the fatal discovery about the bowl, and everything else had been forgotten.

This was a fine opportunity to try it, for Arthur was not always in such an amiable mood. Perhaps he never again would offer to lend her his wheel and to teach her. The other boys owned bicycles, to be sure, but it was always hard to find them at liberty. There was usually something of importance to be done, and Theodora had noticed that not one of them seemed anxious to lend his wheel to a beginner. Charlie had offered, though, that morning, and she had lost the rare chance by going into the house to ask permission. She concluded not to let another opportunity slip; so, after giving the matter brief consideration, she joyfully accepted Arthur's overture, with or without her aunts' approval.

"Come over the wall, then," said he. "The best place for you to learn is on our drive. I 'll try and find one of the other fellows to help teach you; for of course you 'll go tumbling all over everywhere, and we might as well try to save the wheel."

Teddy wondered if no effort was to be made to save her as well as the wheel; but she said nothing, and quickly climbed the wall.

The Misses Middleton meanwhile were discussing the situation.

"I know the child is speaking the truth," said Miss Thomasine, again and again. "Some one else is responsible for the accident. Now let us consider who it can have been."

"Not one of the servants, I am sure," said Miss Middleton. "They have lived with us too long for us not to know that they would confess if they were guilty;

and who else has been in the house today?''

Miss Melissa suddenly started forward.

''Sister Adaline, you forget! Some one—there have been others! Do you not remember?''

''Others? What others?''

''Surely you remember!''

''Melissa, do be more explicit, I beg of you!'' cried Miss Joanna. ''It is so easy to say what you mean, if you would only try it. Who else has been in the house?''

''Dear Joanna, you are so abrupt! Dorcas, you remember?''

But Miss Dorcas had discovered a mistake in her knitting, and was busy counting.

''Four, five, six, seven,'' she said

aloud, to show them that she could not speak.

"I am astonished that you have the heart to knit, when the Middleton bowl is broken, Dorcas!" exclaimed Miss Joanna. "Melissa, kindly tell us what you mean."

But her sister's manner was apt to frighten the faltering Melissa, and she was now looking for her salts.

"I think I know whom Melissa means," said Miss Thomasine, suddenly. "Two or three of the Hoyt boys accompanied Theodora when she came with the cat."

Miss Melissa nodded. There was not a sound for a moment, the new idea presented by this recollection was so astounding.

"Do you think—" began Miss Joanna,

and then stopped, for once unable to finish her speech.

"It might be," whispered Miss Middleton.

"It seems really—but then—perhaps —" murmured Miss Melissa.

"Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen. I should not be surprised," said Miss Dorcas, laying down her needles at last.

"I am sure that it was not Theodora," repeated Miss Thomasine, more earnestly than ever.

"There were several boys in the house," continued Miss Joanna, "and I should not be at all surprised. Adaline, suppose we order the carriage at once and drive to Mrs. Hoyt's. What do you think of it?"

"Quite right, Joanna. You and I will go, and Thomasine."

And they at once made ready for the call.

Although it was but a short distance to their neighbor's house, it did not occur to the ladies to walk. They took a certain amount of exercise on their own place every morning and afternoon, but a call would have been shorn of half of its formality did they not go in their carriage, and the Misses Middleton were nothing if not formal.

They had left their own domain, and were being driven slowly along the bit of road which lay between their gates and those of their neighbor, when, with a rapid whiz, a bicycle flew past them, followed by another and another.

"It is a custom which is very alarming," remarked Miss Middleton.

"There seemed to be a girl on one of

them," said Miss Joanna. "So very unladylike!"

Miss Thomasine said nothing, but she leaned out of the carriage and looked after the rapidly receding figures. She was quite certain that she recognized that short scarlet skirt and that flying brown hair, but she dared not name her fears.

Presently the carriage drew up at Mrs. Hoyt's front steps. There were no boys to be seen but Arthur, who disconsolately leaned over the piazza railing. Teddy had ridden away on his wheel, accompanied by two of his brothers, and there was nothing for him to do but to await their return. When he saw the approach of the Misses Middleton he turned and fled.

"I wonder where Theodora is?" remarked Miss Middleton. "I hoped to find her with Arthur—such a nice, quiet little boy. Where can she be?"

And still Miss Thomasine held her peace.

Mrs. Hoyt was at home, and the ladies were ushered into the parlor.

"Sister, you must be the one to speak," said Miss Joanna to Miss Middleton, "and I will help you when it is necessary." And neither of her hearers doubted that she would.

It was difficult to open the subject; for Mrs. Hoyt, filled with trepidation at being caught unawares by her stately neighbors, talked with nervous haste. The parlor was in sad confusion, having lately been the scene of a bear-fight, carried on by several of her boys. She herself had not yet dressed for the afternoon, and she was wondering if the Misses Middleton would discover the fact. Fortunately her gingham gown was well made and clean; still, it was a gingham, and it was afternoon, and Mrs. Hoyt had lived long enough in Alden to know Alden ideas.

But the Misses Middleton did not notice. They were trying to find a means of stemming the tide of Mrs. Hoyt's conversation.

"We have come on a matter of importance," said Miss Middleton at last. "I think, Joanna, we may call it important?" looking at her sister.

"Very important," said she, with emphasis.

"Very important," echoed Miss Thomasine, more mildly, plucking nervously at the folds of her camel's hair shawl.

"Indeed!" said Mrs. Hoyt. "Is there anything I can do for you? You seem troubled about something. I hope nothing has happened.''

There was a slight noise at the back of the room at this juncture, and Miss Middleton, who was about to speak, stopped abruptly.

''It is only Arthur, probably,'' said his mother. ''Arthur dear, come speak to the Miss Middletons.''

But no Arthur was forth-coming, so Miss Middleton began again.

''We have met with a great loss. You have heard of—in fact, I know you have seen—the Middleton bowl.''

''I should think so! My dear Miss Middleton, you don't mean to say that anything has happened to that? Oh, how shocking! Is it broken, or has it been stolen?''

''It is broken. It would almost have

been better had it been stolen. Do you not agree with me, Joanna?''

''I do,'' said Miss Joanna. Miss Thomasine did not speak.

''For there is a great mystery connected with it,'' continued the speaker. ''We cannot discover who broke it.''

''Could it have been one of the servants?'' asked Mrs. Hoyt, eagerly. ''Oh, that beautiful bowl! So valuable! So exquisite! It must have been one of the servants.''

''It was not,'' snapped Miss Joanna. ''They have lived with us from fifteen to thirty years, and they were all in another part of the house when it happened. It was some one else.''

''We thought at first that it must have been our niece, Theodora,'' continued Miss Middleton. ''There were certain circumstances which led us to suspect her very strongly; but she declares that she did not do it, and our sister Thomasine is inclined to believe her.''

''I am quite sure that Theodora did not break the bowl,'' said Miss Thomasine, quietly, but firmly.

''Then who could have done it?'' asked Mrs. Hoyt.

There was a profound silence in the room, while the three sisters looked at one another. Twice Miss Middleton essayed to speak, but her voice failed her, and she coughed instead. Miss Thomasine pulled off her gloves, quite unconscious that she was committing such a breach of etiquette. Miss Joanna at length recovered her usual courage.

''We think, Mrs. Hoyt,'' said she, clearly, and with emphasis, nodding her head in time to her words, and causing her spectacles to flash ominously—''we think that it may have been one of your sons."

Mrs. Hoyt was speechless, and she grew very pale.

"What makes you think so?" she asked at length. Even Miss Joanna quailed before the light that was in her eyes.

"Because," she faltered—"because some of them were in our house this morning."

"Miss Middleton, I think I can safely say that if one of my boys were responsible for such a misfortune, he would be enough of a gentleman to acknowledge it and to apologize. However, I will question them in your presence—that is, if they can be found. Ah, there they come now, up the drive, and Teddy is with them. They have been teaching her to ride the bicycle."

She left the room as she spoke. The Misses Middleton looked at one another.

"Our niece on a bicycle!" murmured Miss Middleton.

"I believe it was she whom we met!" exclaimed Miss Joanna. "I believe also that she, and she alone, broke the bowl. This only goes to prove it."

"How does it prove it, Joanna?" asked Miss Thomasine; but Miss Joanna merely glared at her through the gleaming spectacles.

Clement and Raymond came quickly into the house in response to their mother's call, followed closely by Theodora, who was fully prepared to find her aunts in the parlor, for she had seen the waiting carriage. The boys took off their caps, and politely shook hands with each of the ladies. Their manners were good, as even their natural enemies, the Misses

Middleton, had always been forced to admit.

"Which of you were at Miss Middleton's house to-day?" asked Mrs. Hoyt.

"Clem, and I, and Arthur," said Raymond.

"Where is Arthur now?"

"He 's 'round here somewhere. We left him here when we went off with Ted. She was on his wheel; and, mother, she rides as well as a fellow. She went right straight off, instanter."

The three Misses Middleton groaned audibly, while their niece flushed with pleasure at this hearty praise. Mrs. Hoyt did not pause, however.

"I am afraid Arthur is hiding somewhere. I am quite sure he is in the room. Please look for him, as he has not the civility to come when his mother calls him."

Raymond and Clem made a dash for the back of the room, where they at once discovered the missing Arthur, and dragged him from his retreat. He came forward, hanging his head and looking the picture of misery. His mother glanced at him reproachfully, upon seeing which Arthur looked more miserable still.

CHAPTER IV

AN ERRAND OF MERCY

"BOYS," said Mrs. Hoyt, "the Misses Middleton have met with a great loss. Their beautiful bowl is broken. You have seen it, and you have heard of its value, and you can imagine how badly they feel about it, and now they are trying to find out who broke it. You were at their house this morning, I believe. Do you know anything about it?"

Raymond and Clement were unmistakably very much surprised. They had not heard of the accident before, it was plainly to be seen, and they eagerly disclaimed all knowledge of the affair.

"Was that the broken china you found in the currant-bushes?" exclaimed Raymond. "How on earth did it get there?"

"Oh, I say!" cried Clement, in the same breath. "Teddy, what were you and Arthur doing by the currant-bushes before the kitten's funeral? Don't you remember, Ray?" And then he stopped abruptly. He did not want to "give them away," he said to himself.

"And what do you know about it, Arthur?" asked his mother.

Arthur said nothing.

"Did you go into Miss Middleton's parlor this morning?"

Still there was no answer.

"Arthur, come here to me. Now tell me, darling, did you go into Miss Middleton's parlor this morning?"

"Yes, mother," he said, in a very low voice.

"Did you break the bowl?"

The silk gowns of the three visitors

rustled audibly as they leaned forward to listen. Teddy drew a step nearer and waited eagerly for his reply, and the other boys gathered about their mother and brother, as though to sustain the family honor through this terrible emergency. But Arthur remained silent.

"Did you break the bowl, Arthur?"

"No, mother, I did n't."

And then, boy of eleven though he was, and with his older brothers looking on, he began to cry.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Raymond, "don't be a baby, Art! If you did it, why don't you own up?"

"Because I did n't do it," said Arthur. "I did n't do it, and I wish I 'd never seen the old bowl!"

"Why, Arthur," said Theodora, "I thought— Are you sure you did n't do it?"

“Of course I ’m sure; just as sure as you are, or anybody else.”

“Do you know anything about it?” asked Mrs. Hoyt. “Do you know who did do it?”

To this there was no reply whatever.

“It is very strange,” said Miss Joanna, grimly. “Theodora and Arthur both had something to do with the calamity, for Arthur acknowledges that he was there, and Theodora carried away the fragments. One of them must be guilty of it. Is your boy truthful, Mrs. Hoyt?”

Before his mother could speak, Raymond stepped forward and stood in front of the Misses Middleton.

“Look here,” said he. “I guess you ’d better understand that we Hoyts are n’t cowards and we are n’t liars. If my brother Arthur broke that bowl, you bet he ’d say so!”

"Hush, Ray!" said his mother. "That is not the proper way to speak to ladies. But I think, Miss Middleton, that what Raymond says is the case. If Arthur had done it he would acknowledge it."

"But, Arthur," cried Teddy, whose face expressed her complete mystification, "I thought—I don't understand!"

"Hush up!" said Arthur, between his sobs.

"Suppose we ask Teddy to give an account of what transpired this morning," said Mrs. Hoyt. "Did you find Arthur in the parlor?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hoyt," said Theodora. "I was n't going to tell this, on Arthur's account, but I suppose I 'll have to, as long as you ask me. When I went down to wait for Aunt Tom to go to the garden I went to the parlor, and there I met Arthur coming out. He was crying,

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and he seemed terribly frightened, and was saying, 'Hide it! hide it!' and he ran away. When I went in, there was the bowl on the floor, broken. And then I heard Aunt Tom coming down-stairs, and I did n't stop to think, but just picked up the pieces and carried them out under my apron."

"And is that all you know?"

"Yes, Mrs. Hoyt, it is all I know."

No one could doubt the truthfulness of this statement, and the three Misses Middleton rose to go, satisfied, if only for the moment, that their niece was guiltless. They drove off, Theodora occupying the fourth seat in the old barouche, and Mrs. Hoyt was left alone with her boys.

A week passed away, and the mystery of the broken bowl was as far from being solved as it had been at the beginning. It was carefully carried by three of the ladies to the old china-mender in the town of Alden, who cemented the pieces together so skilfully that the uninitiated would never discover that it had been broken; but its owners knew only too well that this treasure was no longer what it had once been, and their feelings had received a shock from which they could not soon recover.

As Miss Joanna remarked, when she examined the bowl upon its return, "Mr. Jones has done it very well; but he cannot mend our hearts, which were broken when the Middleton bowl was broken, and even if the cracks are well hidden, they will always stare us in the face!"

Though her aunts no longer thought that Theodora was actually responsible for the accident, they were quite sure that she knew who was, and they censured her severely for her silence. Even Miss Thomasine felt that she might tell them more if she would. But Teddy had already given her version of the affair, and there was nothing more to be said. She had supposed from the beginning that Arthur was the author of the misfortune, and though she did not like to doubt his word, she greatly feared that he was not speaking the truth when he denied this.

His brothers stoutly maintained his innocence when talking to Theodora, or to any one outside of the family, but with one another they acknowledged having some misgivings.

"You see, Art has been sick such a lot that I guess he is afraid to own up," said they among themselves. "He is n't just like the rest of us. Look how afraid he is in the dark, and in that spooky place in the woods, and of lots of other things. I suppose he is afraid father will punish him if he owns up, and so he 's going to keep it dark as long as he can.''

Mr. and Mrs. Hoyt were both greatly troubled by the affair. They knew the value of the bowl, a value which could not be made good by any amount of money, and they knew that such a rare work of art could never be replaced; and, besides, the fact that if Arthur had broken it he lacked sufficient moral courage to confess, was a bitter grief to them. But the ''if'' was a large one, and Arthur's mother could not bring herself to believe that her boy was not speaking the truth.

Arthur himself showed plainly that he was suffering. He grew pale and lost his appetite; he started at every sound, and when he was out-of-doors he would stop constantly in his play to look about apprehensively, to peer behind bushes or trees, and to take refuge in the house did he see any one coming.

He and Teddy discussed the subject more than once, but never with any satisfactory result. It usually ended in his running to his mother to declare, with tears and sobs, that he did not break the old bowl, and he wished that he had never seen it.

In the meantime Teddy continued to ride the bicycle. Her aunts seemed to have completely forgotten having seen her in the very act. They did not mention the subject again, being absorbed in conjectures and grief about the bowl, and Theodora, apparently believing that silence gave consent, did not recall it to their minds.

The boys were all perfectly willing now that she should use their wheels, for she soon rode as well as they did, and as there were so many bicycles in the family, there was usually one that she could take.

One afternoon Teddy had been off on quite a little excursion by herself. She was on Arthur's wheel, and she had gone "around the square," as they called it, coming home by a back way. Just as she drew near her aunts' house a heavy shower which had been gathering for some time, unnoticed by Theodora, came pattering down.

There was hail as well as rain, and Teddy rode quickly to the house and went in by the kitchen door. She took the wheel in with her and placed it in the back hall, in an out-of-the-way corner, intending to return it to Arthur as soon as the storm should be over.

But it lasted longer than she expected, and by the time it had ceased to rain supper was ready. It was quite dark now by six o'clock, and Theodora knew that her aunts would not allow her to go out alone so late, so she determined to get up early the next morning, and take the wheel back then. She said nothing of this plan, however, and did not mention to her aunts that a hated bicycle was in the house.

In fact she was not at all sure that she was doing right to ride without their permission, and she made up her mind that she would tell them to-morrow. Now that she had attained her object, and had learned how, she would not mind so much if she were forbidden by them to ride, for she was sure that when her father and mother returned to this country in the spring they would buy her a wheel, and until then she could wait. Indeed, she hoped, from what she had heard her mother say, that Mrs. Middleton would learn to ride herself, in spite of the sentiments of her sisters-in-law upon the subject.

Eight o'clock was Teddy's bedtime, and she bade her aunts good-night at that hour as usual. She had been asleep but a short time when she was awakened by a commotion in the hall, most unusual in that quiet household. There were hurried footsteps and half-smothered exclamations, and presently she was quite sure that she heard moans of pain.

Springing out of bed, she ran to the door and opened it just in time to see Miss Thomasine hurry through the hall with a mustard plaster in her hand, while in the distance appeared Miss Melissa with a hot-water bag, and from another room emerged Miss Dorcas with a bottle of medicine.

"What is the matter, Aunt Tom?" asked Teddy. "Is any one sick?"

"Your aunt Joanna is very ill," whispered Miss Thomasine, as she passed.

Much startled, Teddy went back to her room and waited. Then she concluded to dress herself and go to her aunt's door to see if she could be of any help. This did not take long, but when she knocked at the door it was opened by Miss Dorcas, who told her that she had better not come in.

Theodora was sadly frightened, and the groans which she heard did not tend to reassure her. Her aunt must be very ill; perhaps she was even dying.

"Have you sent for the doctor?" she asked.

"There is no one to send," said Miss Dorcas, "for John is in bed with a bad attack of rheumatism; so your aunt Melissa is going with Catherine, the cook. They are getting ready now, but I am afraid it will take them a long time to get to Dr. Morton's house; and it is so very late for women to be out alone—after ten o'clock!"

And then she shut the door again, and her niece was left alone in the hall, with the sound of her aunt Joanna's moans in her ears.

She went to look for her aunt Melissa, and found that she was just rousing Catherine from her first heavy slumber. Though ten o'clock was not late in the eyes of the world, the Middleton household had been in bed for an hour, and to them it seemed like the middle of the night.

It would take Catherine a long time to get awake, to say nothing of dressing. Miss Melissa herself was in her wrapper, and Theodora supposed that she would not go forth even upon an errand of life and death without arraying herself as if for a round of calls, down to the very last pin in the shoulder of her camel's-hair shawl—and in the meantime Aunt Joanna might die!

How dreadful it was! Teddy wished that she could do something. She did not love Aunt Joanna as she did her other aunts, but she would do anything to save her life. She could run to Dr. Morton's in half the time that it would take Aunt Melissa and old Catherine to get there.

Suddenly she bethought herself of

Arthur's wheel down in the back entry. She would go on that!

No sooner said than done. She did not tell her aunts of her inspiration, knowing that valuable time would be lost in the discussion that would ensue, and she would probably be back before Aunt Melissa had left their own gates. She flew down-stairs, picking up her worsted cap as she ran through the hall. It took but a moment to unfasten the back door and lift the wheel down the short flight of steps. Another moment and she was mounted and off.

The storm-clouds had rolled away, and the sky was now perfectly clear. The moon had risen an hour since, making the night as bright as day with its strange, weird light, the light that transforms the world into such a different place from that which the sun reveals.

Teddy had seldom been out at night, and now to go alone on such an errand and in such a manner filled her with excitement.

To be fleeing away on a bicycle at dead of night to save her aunt's life was something which she had never dreamed it would be her fate to do.

Puddles of rain-water stood here and there in her path, but the Alden roads were noted for their excellence, and even after the heavy shower they were hard as boards, and the pools were easily avoided. The moonlight cast strange shadows over the lawn, and as she flew past the gate-post it almost seemed as if some one were standing there and had moved; but of course that was only her imagination, Teddy told herself. The child had not a thought of fear.

Her aunts' house was on the outskirts

of the town, and at this hour the street was but little frequented, and she met no one as she skimmed over the broad white road. Dr. Morton's house was about a mile from that of the Misses Middleton, and it did not take long to get there. The doctor's buggy was at the door, and he himself was just in the act of alighting, when there was the whiz of a wheel on the gravelled driveway and the sharp, sudden ring of a bicycle bell.

The doctor turned in time to see a small girlish figure swing herself to the ground.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed he, much startled. "Who is this?"

"It 's Teddy Middleton, and Aunt Joanna is very ill. Please come just as quick as you can, Dr. Morton."

"Bless my soul!" repeated the doctor. "You don't mean to tell me the good ladies have allowed you to come out at this hour of the night, and on a bicycle?"

He knew them well, and had heard them discourse more than once on the subject of their pet aversion.

"No, they don't know anything about it," said Teddy. "And Aunt Melissa and old Catherine are getting ready to walk here, so I must hurry back and stop them; and I think Aunt Joanna is dying, Dr. Morton, so please hurry."

Before the doctor could reply she had mounted her wheel and had disappeared in the shadow of the trees at the gate. Without waiting another moment he stepped into his buggy, and turning his tired horse once more away from home, he drove after her as quickly as possible.

Teddy reached the house just as her aunt, clothed with the care which she had suspected, and accompanied by the still half-asleep Catherine, emerged from the front door. The sight of some one at the foot of the steps nearly caused Miss Melissa to faint with horror upon the spot.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Burglars! Murder!"

"No, it is n't, Aunt Melissa. It 's only Teddy. You need n't go for the doctor; he is coming."

"Child, what do you— Catherine, your arm, please! Surely you have n't been—and on that!"

The unwonted excitement under which Miss Melissa was laboring caused her to be more incoherent even than usual.

"Yes, I have been for him," said Teddy, coolly, as she lifted the bicycle up the steps and stood it on the piazza, "and here he comes now."

The roll of wheels and the quick tread

of a horse's hoofs were heard upon the avenue, and in another moment the doctor had alighted. Miss Melissa, incapable of further speech, turned and followed him into the house.

He found Miss Joanna indeed very ill with a sharp attack of the heart trouble to which she was subject. It was some time before she was relieved, but at length the pain passed by, and she was at least out of danger; but it had been a narrow escape.

"If I had been five minutes later I doubt if I could have saved her," said the doctor, "and it is all owing to that niece of yours that I got here in time."

"May I ask what you mean, Doctor?" said Miss Middleton. "I thought that my sister Melissa went to you."

"Miss Melissa was just about to leave the house when I drove up. That bright

"Miss Melissa nearly fainted with horror."

little Teddy came for me on a wheel. Where she got it I don't know, unless you have relented and given her one. If you have n't, it is high time you did, for she deserves it for her presence of mind. And it is high time, too, that you changed your minds about bicycles, for it is all owing to one that Miss Joanna is alive now. I tell you that if I had been five minutes later she would n't be living now."

"Oh, Doctor!" exclaimed the three ladies who were with him in the room next to Miss Joanna's, while the fourth watched by the invalid's bed.

"It is the truth," continued Dr. Morton, who was in the habit of speaking his mind plainly to the awe-inspiring Misses Middleton, as well as to every one else; "and that bright little Teddy deserves a wheel of her own—if you have n't given her one already.''

In the meantime Teddy had been wandering about the big house, not knowing quite what to do with herself. She went to her own room at first, but she could not stay there. It was just near enough to her aunt Joanna for her to hear muffled sounds from her room without knowing what they meant. She could not go there, and her aunts were all too much occupied in obeying the doctor's commands and in waiting upon their sister to speak to her.

The servants had collected in the back part of the hall, very much frightened at the state of affairs, weeping and exclaiming with one another. Theodora, after trying each unoccupied room in turn, at last found herself in the parlor. It was very dark at first, but she pulled up the Venetian blinds at the front windows, and let in a flood of moonlight.

Teddy had never before seen the room look so attractive. It was not often so brilliantly illuminated, for the shades were always carefully drawn. She moved restlessly about for a time, not daring to touch any of the treasures, but looking at them with interest and curiosity.

The mended bowl was again in its place upon the Chinese table, the beautiful yellow porcelain shining in the silvery light.

"I wonder if Arthur really did n't do it," thought Teddy. "It is the queerest, strangest thing that ever happened. I wish we could find out about it."

She thought about this for some time, and then, spying a Chinese puzzle which hung from a corner of a cabinet. she took it down and began to play with it. It was composed of a number of slender sticks of carved ivory which were strung horizontally upon silken cords of various colors. Theodora had seen it before, and she never wearied of slipping the sticks up and down the silk, first disclosing a dozen cords, then but two or three, sometimes more, sometimes less, the mechanism of which constituted the puzzle. She worked at it for ten minutes, sitting in the full glory of the moonlight; and then suddenly she became conscious that she was not alone in the room.

A slight, almost imperceptible noise behind her, the faintest of movements in the back of the room, told her that unquestionably some one was there!

CHAPTER V

A NIGHT ADVENTURE

YES, some one was in the room. Theodora felt a little thrill of excitement as she realized this fact. Was it a robber who had hidden there? Perhaps, though, it was only one of the servants. She felt almost disappointed when this thought crossed her mind—a robber would be so much more uncommon. And yet he might try to kill her; robbers frequently did such things. She withdrew more into the shadow, and waited.

Not another sound was to be heard. Brave as she naturally was, Theodora felt a tremor of fear as she sat there in the silence of the night. She was quite sure that she had heard something; of that there was no doubt. She knew with absolute certainty that some one or something alive was in her aunts' parlor besides herself.

Should she go and call somebody? No, that would not do, for her aunts had had too much excitement already. If they knew that a burglar—for it certainly might be one—was in the drawing-room they would without doubt scream and faint, and that would be bad for her aunt Joanna, to say the least. The servants would be useless, for they were all elderly, and were quite as unstrung as were their five mistresses, and John, the only man of the household, was ill in his room over the stable.

The doctor was up-stairs, to be sure, but it was early in the night, and he was in close attendance upon his patient, who was not yet out of danger. All these thoughts passed rapidly through Teddy's mind, and she saw that she must act alone.

"I don't believe a robber would kill a little girl," she said to herself, "and I will speak to him very politely."

Her first act was to walk around the room pulling up all the Venetian blinds as high as they would go. There were seven windows in the large room—two at each end, and three on the side that had the two fireplaces. On the fourth side of the room were two doors, one leading into the front hall, the other into the back. The parlor occupied the whole of that side of the main house. The kitchens were in the "L" at the back, cut off by a door into the hall.

It required some courage to go from window to window, particularly when

Teddy reached that part of the room whence the sound had come, but she felt that she must have as much light as possible. Her fingers trembled as she tried to fasten the cord which held the blinds. Once their strength failed them, and the slats of the blind fell down with a terrifying clatter; but she pulled them up again, and wound the cord firmly about the hook.

At last the seven shades were up, and the room was as light as the world without. Only here and there lay a black shadow which might contain—anything! Teddy then took up her position near the door, that she might escape should affairs become very alarming, and tried to speak. At first not a sound came from her. She cleared her throat, and tried again.

"Is anybody in this room?" she

asked. Only the silence and the shadows made reply. "I am quite sure some one is," she continued, gaining courage at the sound of her own voice; "I heard you breathe a little while ago, and I heard you knock something. If you don't come out I shall have to go and call Dr. Morton, who is up-stairs. He is with my aunt Joanna, who is very ill. I should lock the parlor doors while I am gone, so you could n't get out."

She thought this was a brilliant inspiration, quite forgetting the seven windows within easy reach of the ground. To this long speech, however, there was no reply.

"I declare, it is too bad!" went on Teddy. "I do think you might say something. I won't let any one hurt you, and if you are a robber I 'll let you get away as easily as anything, if you 'll only come out!''

She ceased again, and suddenly a voice replied. It sounded so near, and it was so unexpected—for she had now almost made up her mind that no one was there, after all—that it made Teddy jump.

''Do you mean that?'' it said.

''Yes, of course I do,'' said she, speaking very rapidly, and fixing her eyes upon the old-fashioned sofa with the high back, whence the voice seemed to proceed. ''Please come out and tell me who you are and what you want.''

The sofa was placed across a corner, and as Teddy watched it eagerly it was pushed slightly from behind, and a boyish figure rose against the wall. There was something about the intruder that seemed familiar to her, and she stepped forward.

"Why—why, is it you?" she exclaimed, as the boy climbed over the sofa and stood in the moonlight.

"Yes, it 's me," was the reply.

Sure enough, it was Andy Morse, the boy who stoned the kitten.

"Why, what do you want here?" asked Teddy, all her fear vanishing at sight of this well-known face. "I am so glad it is you, for, do you know, I was really afraid it was somebody come to steal something. What have you come for, and why did you come in such a queer way in the middle of the night?"

The boy shuffled his feet, and looked away from her.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" she continued.

"Yes," said he, in a hoarse whisper; "I 'm awful hungry."

"Oh, are you? Well, just wait here,

and I 'll get you something to eat. Or perhaps you had better come with me, for my aunts don't like to have eating in the parlor. You might drop the crumbs, you know. I often do. We 'll go out to the kitchen; but first I must find some matches."

"Here 's one," said Morse, diving into his pocket.

He followed her through the door into the back hall. She could not reach the gas-burner, so he lighted it for her, both there and in the kitchen. She went to the bread-box and took out a loaf of Catherine's delicious graham bread, and then she went to the refrigerator in the hall and procured some butter. A pitcher of milk and some cold mutton were also within reach. These she brought and placed upon the kitchen table, inviting her guest at the same time to draw up a chair. Then, having supplied him with a knife and fork, and some cookies which she found in the store-room, she sat down at the table herself.

"I am hungry too," she remarked affably. "I have been up all night, and I went after the doctor on a bicycle. It makes you awfully hungry to do so much in the night."

Her guest made no reply to this, but devoted himself to his supper with an avidity which left no doubt of his being hungry himself. Every drop of the milk had disappeared, every scrap of meat upon the mutton-bone had been devoured before he spoke. Then he pushed back his chair. "Thank you," said he. "I ain't had nothin' ter eat since day before yesterday."

"Oh," cried Theodora, "I don't wonder you were hungry! Won't you have something more? Why, how did it happen?"

"It happened 'cause I 'm tired of askin' folks ter give me somethun when they don't want ter, and I 'ain't had no money ter pay for it, and yer can't get nothin' without payin' for it unless yer wants ter get chucked inter jail. So that is the reason I come here. I thought I 'd get ter jail sooner or later, and I might as well try for somethun big first. Yer don't much care what yer do when yer as hungry as I was."

"What do you mean?" asked Teddy. "I don't quite understand what you say about jail."

The boy looked at her in silence for a moment or two. "Look ahere," said he, at last. "I thought I hated yer 'count o' that black eye yer give me long o' that cat. I ain't never been set onter by a girl before, and it jest made me rippin' mad. I did n't s'pose I 'd ever git over it, and I 'd 'a' liked ter 'a' paid yer back over and over again, but I feel diff'runt now. Yer 've been mighty perlite, and give me as good a lot o' victuals as I ever tasted. I feel better, now I 've got somethun inside o' me, and I 'm agoin' to tell yer somethun. I don't believe, after all, as yer the kind o' girl as would git me inter trouble."

"Oh no; of course not!" said Teddy, earnestly. "I was very mad at you that day, for I do think it is perfectly horrible for any one to hurt an animal. I 'm sorry I hurt you very badly, but I may just as well tell you the truth. You had better never do it again if you see me anywhere near, for I am sure, perfectly sure, that it would make me just as mad as it did that day, and I am very much afraid I should attack you the same way. My aunts did not like my doing it at all, and they said it was unladylike, and I suppose it was. But oh! you don't know how angry it makes me to see any one cruel to animals!"

They were standing facing each other, the little girl in her pretty red frock, with the mass of tumbled brown hair falling over her shoulders; the tall ungainly boy in his ragged clothes, twisting his hat in his hands as he listened to this tirade. When she had finished, he lifted his eyes and looked at her admiringly.

"Yer a good one," said he. "I kinder like yer underneath fer it, though yer did give me a black eye and make me mad. And yer 've been that good ter me ter-night, givin' me such a lot ter eat, that I 'm willin' ter promise yer somethun. I won't stone no more kittens, not if I can help it, nor puppies neither."

"Oh, thank you!" cried Theodora fervently. "I am so much obliged to you for saying that! Will you really be kind to animals after this? You don't know what a relief to my mind it is. I have often thought of you since, and wondered if you were being cruel; and now I shall feel quite easy about you. The poor kitten died, you know."

Morse said nothing to this.

"And we had a funeral," continued Teddy. "That was a dreadful day altogether, except the funeral. That was nice, but a terrible misfortune happened to our family that day. But you said you were going to tell me something. Was it about being kind to animals?"

"No, it war n't about animals."

"What was it?" asked Theodora, much interested.

"Will yer promise not ter git me inter trouble?" he asked again.

"Of course I 'll promise."

"Then I 'll tell yer. Do yer know how I got in here ter-night?"

"No; I was going to ask you that."

"Well, yer know when yer went out on the bike?"

"When I went for the doctor? Yes."

"Well, I was down near the gate, a-hangin' round, not knowin' what I was agoin' ter do, and when I seen yer go by, I thinks, here 's a chance. Most likely she 's left a door open or somethun, and I can git in and git somethun or other. Yer see, I was so hungry I was ready for anything. And I found the back door open, and I walked in as easy as anything. I was afraid to hide in the kitchen, for I heard people movin' round, so I crep' inter the parlor, for I knew the big sofa there 'd hide me."

"Why, how did you know that?" asked Theodora. "Have you ever been in our parlor?"

The boy dropped his eyes again, and again shifted his hat.

"I jest thought there 'd be some place there," said he; "most folks has sofas."

"And what were you going to do? Were you going to stay there all night?"

"I was agoin' ter stay there till the house got quiet, and then I was agoin' ter make a grab and be off."

"A grab?" repeated Teddy, wonderingly.

"Yes, a grab. I was agoin' ter take a lot o' things—them silver things and some o' the chiny—anythin' I could get."

"You mean you were going to steal something?"

"Yes," he said, doggedly.

Theodora drew a step nearer.

"Then you were a robber after all!" she said. "I never saw one before. But oh, I am so sorry it was you! I am too sorry! I was just getting to like you, because you said you would be kind to animals after this. Are you really a robber?"

"I ain't one yet," said the boy, "and now I dunno as I 'll ever be one. I feel kinder diff'runt about it, now I 've got somethun inside o' me. I guess you 'd feel like stealin' if yer had n't had nothin' ter eat since day before yesterday."

"I do believe I would," said Theodora, compassionately; "it must be perfectly awful! But oh, I hope you won't steal anything! It is such a wicked thing to do. You know there is a commandment entirely about that, so it must be one of the wickedest things there are. Please don't steal!"

"I won't," said Andy Morse. "I feel diff'runt now."

There was a pause, while Theodora rapidly thought over the situation.

"What are you going to do to-morrow?" she asked. "How will you get something to eat then?"

"Dunno. Trust ter luck, I guess."

"Have n't you any relations?"

"Only an uncle, and he 's drunk most o' the time and won't give me nothin'."

"And won't any of your friends give you anything?"

"Ain't got none, and I 'm tired of askin' people ter give me victuals. There ain't no one as seems ter want ter. Yer see, I 've got a kinder bad name round here. That 's the reason I can't get no work."

"Would n't you like some money?" asked Teddy. "I 've got some up-stairs I could very well give you, if you would let me. Then you could buy yourself something to eat for a few days, at any rate."

The boy looked at her. "Yer a real good un," said he, after a moment's grateful pause. "If I had a little money ter git some decent clo'es, I might git some work somewhere or other. I 'd rather be honest if I can, but a poor shabby-lookin' feller like me don't stand no chance, and everybody in Alden thinks I 'm no good. If I could git away from here, I might git somethun ter do somewhere else. Do yer really mean yer 'd give me some money?"

"Of course I do," replied Teddy;

"I 'll go up and get it now. It 's in my bank. Suppose we put this light out and go back to the parlor; you can wait for me there."

They reached the drawing-room door, and Teddy, opening it, motioned to her guest to go in and be seated. The moonlight still flooded the room, and it lighted up the old silver snuffers and trays, the tall silver candelabra which flanked both ends of the two mantel-pieces, and even Great-grandfather Middleton's gold snuff-box, which was always kept upon a cabinet in the front of the room.

"Say!" exclaimed Andy Morse, in a sharp whisper; "ain't yer 'fraid ter leave me here with all them things? Ain't yer 'fraid I might steal 'em, after all?"

"Oh, no," said Theodora, following him into the room and closing the door, "of course not. You just told me you wouldn't steal, that you were going to be honest, and of course I believe you."

And then she went out of the parlor and left him alone in the moonlight with the gold and the silver, and all the priceless china, from the Middleton bowl down. She was absent about ten minutes. When she returned she carried a small silk bag in her hand, which she gave to Morse.

"It is all in there," she said—"all I have. I just emptied my bank right into that work-bag, for I thought it would be easier for you to carry the money that way. I don't know how much there is there, but I think it is about fifteen dollars, for I've been saving it for some time. It seems heavy, for so much of it is in pennies and five- and ten-cent pieces, but I don't believe you will mind carrying it."

Andy Morse was speechless. He took the bag, shook it, weighed it, looked at it in the light. Twice he tried to speak, but no words came.

"Do yer—do yer really mean to give me all this?" he stammered at last.

"Certainly I do," replied Teddy. "I only hope it will be enough for you to get what you want."

"Look ahere," said Andy; "jest yer listen ter me! I solemnly promise I 'll act straight after this. I won't steal, and I won't hurt no animals, and I won't do nothin' yer would n't like. And if I ever make enough, I 'll pay yer back this money, sure 's I 'm alive. I 'll count it, and I 'll pay yer back every cent. Do yer believe me?"

"Yes, indeed I do; but you need n't bother about paying it back, for you really need it a great deal more than I do.'' As she spoke, her glance fell upon the Middleton bowl, gleaming in the moonlight. ''Before you go, I want to show you this,'' she said, moving over to the Chinese table in the window.

''This was broken the day—the day the kitten died, and we can't find out who did it. It is very, very valuable, and all of our family think more of it than anything else we own, because my great-grandfather brought it home and gave it to his son, and when my aunts die it is to go to my father, and then to me. It is never to go out of the family, and now it is broken, and had to be mended. We can't find out who did it, and it has given us lots of trouble. My aunts thought at first that I did it, and sometimes they think so now, I am sure; but I did n't. It makes me so unhappy to think they don't believe me.'' She paused for a moment and gazed at the bowl. Then she continued. "It is 'nt nice not to be believed, and that is the reason I am telling you about it. I just happened to think of it. I want to tell you again that I really and truly believe you. I don't want you to feel unhappy about that, the way I do about the Middleton bowl."

Andy looked at it in silence. Then he turned away.

"I 'm agoin' now," he said. "Good-by. Yer 've saved me, and I 'll never forgit it. Would yer please tell me what yer name is?" he asked, shyly. "Yer first name, I mean. Of course I know yer other name 's Middleton."

"Theodora," said she, "but everybody calls me Teddy, and I like that best. Good-by! I hope you will be able to get some work. I 'm very glad I came down here to-night. If Aunt Joanna had n't been so ill I should n't have come. If I can ever do anything else for you, I wish you would tell me. Please go out the back door, the way you came in, if you don't mind, for I am afraid my aunts might hear the front door shut, and it would frighten them."

She followed him to the back door and watched him walk away in the moonlight, swinging the bag in his hand. Then she closed the door and went back to the drawing-room.

"It must be dreadful to be so hungry," she said to herself, as she again stood by the Middleton bowl, "and I 'm glad I told him I believed him. It certainly is dreadful not to be believed."

CHAPTER VI

A WELCOME LETTER

IT was four o'clock in the morning before the household had settled down into its accustomed quiet. Miss Joanna was at last sleeping quietly, and the doctor assured the sisters that they need fear no further danger. He begged them to go to their rooms and try to get some rest, for he saw that the four ladies were in a state of nervous excitement which was almost alarming. Miss Middleton declared that she should not leave her sister Joanna, but she begged the others to follow the doctor's advice. Miss Thomasine, as she passed Theodora's room, opened the door quietly and looked in. She intended to tell her niece, if she were awake, that her aunt Joanna was decidedly better.

But when Miss Thomasine peeped into the room, which was but dimly lighted, she was astonished to find that Theodora was not there. She stepped inside and looked again. The bed was empty, as was also the lounge. The room was not large, and one could see at a glance that it was not occupied.

Miss Thomasine felt a shock similar to the one which she had experienced when she was told that Joanna "had one of her attacks." Where could the child be?

In the hall she met Miss Dorcas and Miss Melissa.

"Theodora is not in her room," she whispered. "Where do you suppose she is, sisters? And what had we better do?"

" Miss Thomasine stepped inside and looked again."

The three stood and looked at one another. Without their two ruling spirits, Adaline and Joanna, whose words were always law, the three younger sisters felt much as if they were a ship deprived of both captain and pilot in a stormy sea.

They drew a step nearer to one another.

"Perhaps," said Miss Melissa—"Perhaps—there 's no knowing; she might do anything!—she went again—"

"Went where?" asked Miss Dorcas. "Do you mean on the—the—"

"Do you mean the bicycle?" asked Miss Thomasine, courageously uttering the obnoxious word.

Miss Melissa nodded.

"Oh, it could not be!" said Miss Dorcas.

"Certainly not!" exclaimed Miss

Thomasine. "The child is somewhere in the house, and we must look for her."

They investigated the rooms on the second floor with no success, and then they descended the broad stairs, one behind the other, each clad in a flowered dressing-gown and enveloped in a worsted shawl, and each one carrying a lighted candle in a tall silver candlestick.

Over their heads, shorn of the additional braids which adorned them by day, and in no state to be seen by the doctor or even by the servants, each sister had tied a white knit "cloud." Even Miss Melissa, when she removed her bonnet after her futile attempt to summon the doctor, had again adjusted her cloud.

And now they crept down their own staircase feeling strangely ill at ease. Never before had they been down-stairs at this hour and in this costume, but Theodora must be found.

The parlor door stood open at the foot of the stairs. It was dark there now, for the moon had set and it was not yet dawn. The three ladies gathered at the threshold, and holding their candles on high, peered into the room. There, on the sofa, lay Theodora, one arm hanging over the side, the other tossed above her head. As her aunts drew nearer she moved a little, and murmured in her sleep: "Of course I believe you. It 's dreadful not to be believed."

Then the gleam of the three candles shone full in her face and she awakened, her eyes blinking in the light.

"Why, what is it?" she cried, starting up in terror and gazing at the three odd figures. "Where am I, and who are you? Who are you, I say?"

"My dear Teddy," said Miss Thomasine, "do not be alarmed! Do you not know us?"

"Why, it 's Aunt Tom," said their niece, wonderingly, "and Aunt Dorcas and Aunt Melissa. You don't know how funny you look! Have you been out to walk?"

"Out to walk!" repeated Miss Dorcas severely. "Do you know that it is the middle of the night?"

"Is it, really? Then how did I get here? Oh, I remember! Aunt Joanna was ill, and I went on Arthur's wheel, and then I came down here and found Andy Morse. Oh, it has been such an exciting night! I gave him something to eat in the kitchen. I hope you won't mind, but he was so hungry. And he has promised to be good after this."

The three aunts looked at one another

and then at Teddy's flushed face. Miss Thomasine felt her pulse and asked to see her tongue.

"You have been dreaming, I suppose. Come up-stairs and go to bed, my dear."

"But I did n't dream that, Aunt Tom. Andy Morse was really here, and I gave him some money to go away with. I had some in my bank, you know, so I could do what I liked with it."

"She grows more and more incoherent," said Miss Dorcas.

"I think, sisters," murmured Miss Melissa, "that—that—it would be as well—the doctor right here—"

"I agree with you," said Miss Thomasine; "she most certainly is not well, and the doctor had better see her. Teddy, dear, come up-stairs. Lean on me if you feel at all giddy."

"I 'm not a bit giddy," cried Theodora, springing to her feet, ‘‘and I don’t know what you are talking about. Why must I see the doctor? I am not sick, and oh, I do want to tell you about Andy Morse!’’

Again the sisters looked significantly at one another. Then Miss Thomasine took one of Teddy’s hands and Miss Dorcas possessed herself of the other, while Miss Melissa walked in front with two of the candles.

‘‘We must get her to bed as quietly as possible,’’ said Miss Thomasine. ‘‘Oh, what a night this has been!’’

‘‘I was sure that ride would be too much for her,’’ said Miss Dorcas.

‘‘Is it—do you think it can be? I have heard of it—brain fever?’’ whispered Miss Melissa, turning in affright.

‘‘What do you all mean?’’ exclaimed Teddy, wrenching her hands away from her aunts. "I tell you I 'm not a bit sick, and I do wish you would let me go up-stairs alone! And I don't see why you won't believe what I say. Are you never going to believe me again? I wish you would let me tell you about Andy Morse. He hid behind the big sofa, and I heard him there, and asked him to come out. Do you know, that poor boy had n't had a thing to eat for two days! Just think of it! And he was so desperate he came here to steal something. I don't wonder—do you?"

The sisters had again looked at one another meaningly, and during this speech Miss Dorcas had left the room. Presently she returned with the doctor.

"What 's all this?" he asked. "Teddy ill, after saving her aunt's life, as she did? She doesn't look very ill."

"Of course I 'm not ill, Dr. Morton.

They won't believe me when I say that Andy Morse was hiding here and I gave him something to eat and the money out of my bank. If you go into the kitchen you will see the plates and things on the table, and if you go up to my room you will see the empty bank. I do wish my father and mother were here!" she added. "I 'm just tired of not being believed."

The doctor felt her pulse and looked at her.

"I believe you, my child," he said. "You are as well as I am, and I have no doubt Andy Morse was here. He is quite capable of anything. I am sorry you gave him your money, for he does n't deserve it, but I quite believe you."

Theodora glanced at him gratefully, and from that moment she considered Dr. Morton one of her best friends. He asked her more particularly about the occurrences of the night, and she gave him a detailed history of it from the time when she returned from her ride.

"Well, well," he said, when he heard how she had stood in the moonlight and invited the intruder to come forth—"well, well! you 're the girl for my mind. And did n't you feel afraid?"

"Why, yes, I suppose I was afraid," said she. "But there was nothing else to be done that I could think of, and so I had to do it."

At which the doctor chuckled more appreciatively than ever.

Miss Joanna was much better in the morning, and in a few days was quite convalescent. The sisters were all more or less prostrated by this thrilling night, and it was a week before the household affairs were running with their accustomed smoothness, and before the Misses Middleton could turn their thoughts and their conversation to the ordinary concerns of life.

A new idea and a very startling one had been presented to them, too. Dr. Morton, upon each of his visits to Miss Joanna, had made some remark upon Theodora's courage, upon her presence of mind, upon her general excellence. He declared that she, and she alone, had been the means of saving her aunt's life, and in his opinion she should be rewarded not only for that, but for having prevented a bold and startling robbery.

Undoubtedly Andy Morse, if left to himself, would have carried away the greater part of the Misses Middleton's treasures. According to Dr. Morton, if it had not been for Teddy, her aunts, when they descended in the morning, would have found their large drawing-room absolutely bare and empty. The girl should certainly be rewarded, and no better token of her aunts' gratitude and regard could be found than a bicycle. Not only would it give her pleasure, but it would also be of benefit to her health.

Never before did Dr. Morton discourse so long and so earnestly, and the result was that he gained his point. The ladies held out as long as they could, but he was too much for them.

As Miss Joanna remarked, "When we feel that Theodora really did us such a service, it seems as if we should waive our prejudices."

And for Miss Joanna to acknowledge this, and to call "prejudices" the feelings which had hitherto been designated as "principles" meant a great deal. Miss Thomasine had from the first been in favor of buying the wheel, and had strongly urged it; but not until Miss Joanna thus expressed herself did Miss Middleton actually give her consent.

John, the old coachman, now fortunately recovered from his attack of rheumatism, could scarcely believe his ears when Miss Middleton ordered him to drive to the large bicycle-shop on Main Street.

The carriage with its four occupants reached the shop in due time, and the ladies entered. They looked about in some bewilderment at the vast number of bicycles that were stacked in the place, and the thought that they could all whirl, as wheels will, made them positively dizzy. Miss Melissa was glad that she had brought her salts, and she held them first to one nostril, then to the other.

"What can I do for you, ladies?"

asked the salesman, as he came forward.

"We wish to look at bi-cy-cles," said Miss Middleton, wondering if it could be really she who was making this request, and wishing more than ever that Miss Joanna were there to take the lead.

"Ah, indeed! Something for yourselves, no doubt?"

"Not by any means," said Miss Middleton, coldly, and with all the "Middleton manner" that she could summon to her aid. "We are about to purchase a bi-cy-cle for our niece."

"Oh, certainly! I didn't see her at first. So many ladies do ride, that I thought—However, here is one that I am sure your niece will like—light weight, not more than twenty pounds; improved chain and skirt guards; made in such a way that there is a minimum degree of weight with a maximum amount of safety; small, narrow sweep of handle-bar; latest invention in pedals; small adjustable saddle—most comfortable that is made—though if your niece prefers one of the new hygienic saddles, that can easily be arranged; bell, brake, lantern, and cyclometer thrown in if you pay cash down, together with a full supply of cement, patches, plugs, twine, and needle for a punctured tire, also oil-can, pump, and wrench. Or, if you don't fancy this model, here is another—twenty-one pounds, self-mending tires in case of punctures—"

"Oh, please stop a moment!" cried Miss Middleton. "My dear sisters, I scarcely know what to think. If only Joanna were here! I never dreamed that there were so many accessories to a bi-cy-cle. It seems as if we were getting a great deal for the money."

"A great deal, madam, I do assure you, and at the same time very light weight. To be sure, the tendency this year is to make heavier machines, but this being a miss's wheel, it is absolutely strong, while being at the same time exceedingly light. Just lift it yourself, madam, and you will see."

And before she realized what she was doing, Miss Middleton had laid aside her little satchel and her sunshade, and was actually lifting a bicycle. Each sister in turn, not to be outdone, went through the same form.

One wheel after another was brought forward, and each one seemed to possess more virtues than its predecessor. The three Misses Middleton grew more and more bewildered, while Theodora began to think that the matter would never be settled. She had no opportunity for stating her preference, if she had any, for her aunts appeared to think that she knew nothing at all on the subject.

Their interest increased with their bewilderment, and they soon found themselves conversing with ease about gear and ball-bearings, and the salesman did not allow himself even to smile when Miss Thomasine examined the chain-guard, and said it seemed like an excellent brake. He had begun to hope that he might dispose of four wheels instead of one, so enthusiastic were his customers becoming.

So it might have gone on for some time longer, and there is no knowing what might have transpired, had not Paul Hoyt, greatly to Teddy's relief, appeared in the doorway. He had heard rumors of the intended purchase, and he had at once mounted his own wheel and ridden in search of his neighbors, knowing that it would be an entertaining sight to say the least, and thinking that he might find an opportunity for giving his opinion and lending the weight of his experience.

The Misses Middleton paid more attention to him than they did to Theodora, and at last a wheel was chosen and paid for, and the three ladies, with their niece, left the shop.

They drove away still full of their subject, and when the new bicycle came home it was brought directly to them. The three Misses Middleton who had made the purchase explained to the two who were still in ignorance of its merits the great advantages which this bi-cy-cle possessed over every other make of machine, while Teddy looked on, wondering when the happy moment would arrive that she could take the beloved object and go forth for a ride upon her own, own wheel. Indeed she could scarcely express her gratitude to her aunts, so engrossed were they in all the technicalities of the subject.

About ten days after this, Mrs. Hoyt, accompanied by Arthur, called upon the Misses Middleton. The ladies came down to the drawing-room and greeted their guests with their usual formal courtesy. There was a moment's pause after all had seated themselves, and then Mrs. Hoyt began the conversation.

"I have come," she said, "to speak once more on the subject of the bowl. Have you found yet any clew to the person who broke it?"

"No," said Miss Middleton, "we have not."

"But we still have our suspicions," interposed Miss Joanna.

"And what are they?"

"We did think that it was either Arthur or Theodora. Now we are convinced that it was Arthur, and that our niece, from a mistaken feeling of honor, helped him to hide it. Nothing can change us in this opinion."

"I have come to tell you," said Mrs. Hoyt, quietly but with great firmness, "that Mr. Hoyt and I are perfectly convinced that Arthur did not do it. The evidence is very strong against him, we admit, but he has always been a truthful boy, and we feel very sure that he is so still. The child has been made so unhappy by the affair that I felt it necessary to bring him here, and let him hear me tell you that his father and I do not think he did it."

She rose to go in the pause that followed this speech. The sisters were silent until they also had risen, and then Miss Joanna spoke.

"Our opinion is unchanged," said she, "and always will be."

At this moment the parlor door flew open and Theodora ran into the room.

"I have just met the postman," she cried, "and he gave me this letter! Look at it!" and she held it up for her aunts' inspection.

The envelope was exceedingly soiled, and the stamp was placed upside down on the lower left-hand corner. It was addressed to "miss tedy middleton."

"It is from Andy Morse," she continued; "and—oh, Arthur, he tells it all!" And this was what she read aloud:

" 'miss tedy middleton, dear miss.

" 'i Rite you theese few lines Hopping

thay will find you in Good helth i want too tell you ive got work ime goin on a Ship i wont make mutch yet butt its Better nor nothin and i Hopp ile make more soon its all Bekorse you gave me That Monny and sum day ime goin to pay it Back.

" 'And i want to tell you i broke that bole.' " (Teddy paused in the reading and looked about upon her audience. Her five aunts sank into their chairs, and Miss Melissa vigorously applied her salts, while, much to Arthur's amazement, his mother began to cry. Teddy continued.) " 'i was that Mad the day you give me the Black i that i ran to your house and the dore was open and i went in and sore the bole and i herd of that bole and that hoite Boy was in the parler and i skeered him most to deth and i asked him if that was the middleton bole and he said yes and i smashed it and made him promise not to tell on me and if he did ide kill him i fritened him orful bad and i have ever since.

" 'i was going to tell you about it that nite i was thare only you Was so good to me i diddent Like to and you sed it Cost so mutch i was afraid, butt i remember you sed thay Thort you did it and you beleeved me wen i sed i was going to be onnest so thats the Reeson ive rote this.

yours truly andy morse

" 'thay cant ketch me About the bole bekorse ile be to see wen you read this.' "

When Teddy had finished the letter, Miss Joanna settled her spectacles more firmly upon her aristocratic, aquiline nose. Then she held out her hand for the paper, which she took and examined with care. It was passed from one sister to another as they sat in an impressive silence, which was broken as usual by Miss Joanna.

She rose from her chair, and going to Mrs. Hoyt, she took her by the hand.

"We beg your pardon, Ellen Hoyt," said she, "and we beg your son's pardon. He is a truthful boy, after all, as Theodora is a truthful girl. Is it not so, sisters?"

"It is indeed so," replied they all, as they also rose and gathered about their guests.

Thus Arthur was at last cleared from suspicion and relieved from the state of dread and anxiety in which he had lived since the accident, for Morse had not only threatened him at the time, should he give any information as to what he had done, but had constantly found means since then of frightening the boy,

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which accounted for his nervous condition.

And the Misses Middleton were at last convinced that neither Arthur nor Theodora had broken the Middleton bowl.

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